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THE DRAMA UPSIDE DOWN

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

WITHIN the past three or four years the American playgoer has been privileged to see half a dozen or half a score of plays characterized by an overt effort to find new methods of expression and to broaden the scope of theatrical presentation. In "A Poor Little Rich Girl" we were made spectators of the scenes and the characters that existed only in the ignorant imaginings of a child in the grip of fever. In "Seven Keys to Baldpate" the clever author played a characteristically clever trick upon the audience itself, most unexpectedly taking them into his workshop. In "On Trial" we are made to behold in three successive acts, events which took place long before the beginning of the play itself; and the event thus shown in the second act is earlier than that shown in the first act, and the event shown in the third act is earlier than that shown in the second, thus taking us farther and farther backward toward the beginning of the story. In the "Phantom Rival" we have presented before us the fond day-dreams of a fanciful woman, day-dreams made visible to us, forced to take on a concrete existence, and peopled by four contradictory possibilities of a single character, creatures called into life only by the brooding imagination of the heroine. And in the "Big Idea" we were invited to witness the several stages of the invention, the construction, and the writing of a play which is to be built on the dangerous predicament in which the chief character finds himself in the play which is actually being performed; and this big idea is carried so far that at last we discover that the piece which is being performed before our eyes is the piece we have seen composed.

In all these dramas, serious, comic and serio-comic, four of them American in authorship and one of them freely Americanized from a Hungarian original, there is a deliberate intention to achieve novelty of form. They are all characterized by ingenuity of invention; and at least two of them can be credited,

more or less, with the loftier quality of imagination. They are all of them new departures in the drama, due to the desire of their several authors to desert the beaten path and to explore fresh fields. They have all of them been more or less successful on the stage—that is to say, the authors have been able to carry the public with them along these hitherto untrodden trails. Indeed, it may as well be admitted that a considerable share of the popularity of these pieces is directly due to the attraction exerted upon the spectator by the freshness of treatment which is their most salient quality. These plays seem to many to prove that the wisest of men was less wise than was his wont when he insisted that there was nothing new under the sun. And the favorable reception of this series of daring experiments in stagecraft is the more surprising since the theater itself has always been considered ultra conservative, clinging desperately to ancient landmarks, and struggling blindly against all efforts to overturn its traditions and to overthrow its customs.

There is no occasion for surprise, therefore, that we should now be told vehemently and vociferously that all the traditions of the theater are to be abandoned, that all the customs of the stage are to be renounced, that all the rules of the drama are hereafter to be broken, that all the laws hitherto held binding upon the playwright are to be repealed, and that all the principles of the art are suddenly reduced to chaotic confusion. To many ardent aspirants for dramaturgic victory it seems just now almost as if a bomb had been suddenly exploded in the temple of the drama, shattering the tables of the law, and bringing down the walls in ruin. A skilful and successful American playwright has been quoted as asserting that “the day is not far distant when there will be no stage conventions, so far as the audience is concerned.” A newspaper reviewer of current plays felt emboldened to declare that the professor of dramatic literature in one of our leading universities must be greatly grieved by the success of one of the five plays already cited—a play written by one of the professor’s former students—because it violated “all the doctrines about the drama which the professor had been discussing year after year.”

Now, if this happened to be true, and if the public should accept a play which violated the principles to which this professor of dramatic literature had drawn the attention of his classes, then this would go far toward disestablishing the validity of these principles, and it would put the professor in a situation so awkward as to demand explanation, if not apology, to all his

former pupils. But fortunately for this professor these assertions as to the complete upsetting of the doctrines hitherto expounded by those who have sought to penetrate into the secrets of stagecraft are not well founded. They are the result of a very natural misunderstanding of the wide distinction between any so-called "rules of the drama" or "laws of the drama," which may have won acceptance for the moment, and the eternal "principles" of the art, which are unchanging because they are essential to the existence of the art.

But when we hear an outcry to the effect that the doctrines of the drama are disestablished, that the accepted principles of the art are proved to be false, and the conventions of the theater are certain to disappear, we are entitled to ask what those who make these loud assertions really mean by the words they employ. And after we have considered the meanings of these terms carelessly misused, it will be interesting to take up one or another of the plays which have seemed to be so novel in their structure and so upsetting to dramatic doctrine, and to inquire whether they are really quite so novel and so upsetting as they appear at first sight. It might be profitable also to push the investigation a little further and to find out whether these dramatic novelties actually violate the generally accepted "rules" and "laws" of the drama—the eternal principles of the art they cannot violate and live. For it must always be remembered that our so-called "rules" are only the result of our groping effort to grasp the undying principles which we can perceive only dimly and which are never completely disclosed to any one—not even if he is possessed of the piercing insight of Aristotle. The principle of nature which causes an apple to fall from a tree is eternal; it existed and it did its work long before Newton was able to formulate the Law of Gravitation, and it would continue to exist and to do its work even if some later and greater Newton should some day be able to prove the Law of Gravitation is not just what Newton declared it to be. What is true of Newton's Law in mechanics is true also of Gresham's Law in finance and of Grimm's Law in philology. It is no less true of Brunetière's Law in the drama. The stalwart French critic asserted that it was the essential law of the drama that a play should present strong-willed creatures contending; and the principles of the dramatic art, whatever they are, remain just what they were before Brunetière made this instructive and suggestive attempt to codify one of these principles into a law. The so-called "laws" that men declare may

be repealed; the "rules" they insist upon may be broken, as the Romanticists of France in 1830 smashed the rules held sacred by the Classicists for two centuries; but the principles of the dramatic art, these abide, inherent in the practise of that art and unchanging through the ages, even if no man at any time made sure that he has come to a complete understanding of them.

Even the so-called "rules of the theater," those precepts which are handed down from generation to generation—"Never keep a secret from the audience," "Never try to fool the audience," "Begin in the thick of the action and quit when you are through!" "Show things, don't tell about them; let everything important to the plot happen before the eyes of the spectators"—these are all of them useful monitions, and the 'prentice playwright will do well to get them by heart and to take them to heart. He may even find profit in remembering the advice of the wily old stage-manager to J. R. Planché: "If you want to make the British public understand what you are doing, you must tell them you are *going* to do it, then you must tell them you *are* doing it, and finally you must tell them you *have* done it; and then, confound them! perhaps they will understand you!" This is a brutal overstatement of the undying principle that the playgoers want to know what has happened so that they can follow what is going to happen; and it is this principle which urges the playwright always to be so clear that he cannot be misunderstood even by the inattentive spectator.

The principles of the dramatic art are what they are and what they always have been, even if the most expert theorist has never been able to put them into words with any approach to certainty or to completeness; and the so-called "laws" and the so-called "rules" are only more or less successful attempts to declare one or another of these essential principles. The five plays in which there are novelties of construction have succeeded in pleasing the playgoers, and therefore it is safe to say that no one of them violated any of the eternal principles of the drama. But did any one of them really contradict any of the generally accepted precepts of contemporary play-making?

It is difficult to see any reason why anybody should suppose that either the "Poor Little Rich Girl" or the "Phantom Rival" breaks any of these "rules," unexpected as may be their calling upon the spectator to behold things that exist only in the imagination of one of the characters—things that did not

happen actually, but which that character merely believed to be happening. The authors of these two plays are skilful and careful; they make elaborate preparation; they lead us forward step by step; they tell us what they are going to do, what they are doing, and what they have done. They are so clear and so straightforward that they compel us to follow them. What they ask us to accept may be very unusual and it may not be easy in itself to accept, but they have so presented it that it is not difficult for us to accept. In the "Phantom Rival" and the "Poor Little Rich Girl" the actual novelty is not as new as it may appear to the younger generation of playgoers, and the authors have not needed to break any of the traditional precepts of play-writing.

The authors of "Seven Keys to Baldpate" and of the "Big Idea" have been equally mindful of the principles of the art, and they have not tried to "fool the audience." In the "Big Idea," which is the more daring of the two amusing dramas, the authors take the spectator into their confidence from the beginning. We are made to see the hero and the heroine start to write the very play in which they are characters. The device is dangerous and difficult of acceptance, but the successive scenes are so clear and they are so logically related, each growing out of the predecessor, naturally and inevitably and irresistibly, that we cannot help surrendering ourselves to the delight of watching the authors win their wager. Here again we are told what they are going to do, what they are doing, and what they have done. Even the appeal of the heroine in the final act directly and personally to the assembled audience, asking it to like the play which is being put together before its eyes and in which she is a character—even this is not the overt novelty that it may seem to some. Its most immediate predecessor is to be found in "Peter Pan," but it is a device for evoking laughter, which Molière employed in the "Miser" and Aristophanes in the "Frogs."

There still remains to be considered "On Trial," which has been hailed as the most subversive of all these plays, since "it tells its story backward." If "On Trial" did tell its story backward it would break the rules which prescribe that a playwright must devise an action with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that he must present these several parts in strict sequence. But, as a matter of fact, the author of "On Trial" does not tell its story backward; he tells it straightforward, although he takes the liberty of showing us in successive acts fragments of

his story which took place before the moment when he has chosen to begin it. His play sets before us a man on trial for his life. The scene of every act is laid in the court-room, with the judge on the bench, the prisoner at the bar, the jury in the box, and the opposing counsel. In the first act the widow of the murdered man is called to the witness-stand and she begins to give her testimony, when suddenly there is a dark change and we are made to see in action the episode as to which she was about to testify; and when we have seen this, then there is another dark change, after which we find her on the stand finishing her testimony. In the second act the little daughter of the prisoner is called as a witness; and again we are made spectators of the events as to which she is supposed to be testifying. In the third act, when the wife of the prisoner is summoned to the stand, we are once more invited to behold the thing itself instead of being merely listeners to her testimony. If these three witnesses had been allowed to give their evidence in their own words no one would have suggested that the story was being told backward, because every playgoer knows that in every play there are events which happened long before the play began and which can be made known to the audience only by a telling after the event has happened. The author of "On Trial" does not break any of the "rules of the drama"; he has merely been inventive enough and ingenious enough to devise a new method of making visible to us in the present what took place in the past. The novelty is in the method of presentation, and not in any departure from the precepts of play-making.

It may be that some of these precepts valid to-day may prove invalid in the future; and that the theorists of a later generation will be forced to another effort to formulate the underlying and unchanging principles. And it is well always to remember that the precept, the rule, the law is only a rough-and-ready attempt to get at a principle, and that a precept must always give way when it comes in conflict with a principle. It is a sound rule which bids the playwright not to keep a secret from the audience. Bronson Howard once told me that one of the dullest evenings he ever spent in the theater was due to the playwright having kept a secret. The play was a dramatization of Miss Braddon's novel, *Henry Dunbar*, made by Tom Taylor. A daughter knows that her father has been wronged by Henry Dunbar and has been led thereby into a life of crime. She receives a letter from her father announcing his intention of seeking Henry Dunbar, who has just

returned to England after a long stay in India, and of having it out with his old enemy. And after that she hears nothing more from her father, who has vanished from the face of the earth. She has no doubt that Henry Dunbar has made away with him, and she sets out in pursuit. But Henry Dunbar evades her again and again just when they are on the point of meeting. At last she corners him; and in the Henry Dunbar who stands before her at bay she recognizes her father—who has killed his enemy and assumed that enemy's name and that enemy's large fortune. The disclosure is effective in its way—it procures a shock of surprise—but the total effect is far less than it would have been if the spectator had known the facts from the first. In that case there would have been no shock of surprise, but there would have been a steadily increasing intensity of suspense as the daughter came nearer to the father whom she loved and whom she was to find an assassin.

In "Henry Dunbar" the rule not to keep a secret from the spectators was violated to the disadvantage of the play. But in Bronson Howard's own piece, "Young Mrs. Winthrop," it was violated to the advantage of the play—and it was deliberately violated, so its author told me, because it conflicted with one of the eternal principles of the drama. Young Mrs. Winthrop is jealous because her husband is frequently visiting a woman whose antecedents are doubtful. This brings about a dispute so violent that Mrs. Winthrop leaves her husband's house. In the final act she learns that her suspicions were unfounded, since her husband's visits to her supposed rival were due to a highly honorable motive. But the author had kept this motive a secret from the spectators and had allowed them to believe that the jealousy of the wife was probably justified. When I asked him why he had done this he explained that he needed to have his audience sympathize with his heroine when she left her husband, and that the spectators must see things through her eyes and believe the worst. Having only the information that the wife had, they would feel that her departure from her husband's home was fully warranted. If they had known that the husband was innocent of any wrongdoing they would have credited their own knowledge to the wife and they would have held her to be unreasonable if she broke with him for a suspicion which they had seen to be unfounded. And in this case the spectators do not resent having been kept in the dark, for they were not formally told that Winthrop was guilty—they were merely left in doubt, and therefore they were

ready enough to be pleased when he is relieved from suspicion and reunited to his wife.

The assertion that the five plays earlier considered in this article have turned the drama upside down is due to a failure to understand and to apply accurately the precepts of play-making. In like manner, the assertion that there will soon be no stage conventions is due to a similar misunderstanding of the real meaning of the word "convention." In no art can conventions be dispensed with, since the art exists solely by reason of its conventions. Etymologically, "convention" means a "coming together"—that is to say, an agreement; and in every art there are implied contracts between the artist and the public, permitting the artist to depart from the facts of life in order that he may present the truth of life as he shall see it. The painter depicts for our delight the breaking of a wave on the shore—and he can do this only by depriving it of actual motion and fixing it for ever at a single moment of its fall forward. The sculptor sets before us a soldier riding his steed into battle—and he can do this only by depriving man and horse of actual motion and by reducing both to the single color of his material—white marble or brown bronze.

In the theater the public permits the playwright to deny certain facts because it is only by the deliberate denial of these facts that the drama is possible. In real life rooms have four walls, but in the theater one of these walls must be removed so that the spectators can see and hear what is said and done in the room. In real life a whisper may be inaudible ten feet away, but on the stage it has to be loud enough to reach the back of the gallery. In real life our speech is uncertain and ragged and repetitious—we start sentences that we do not finish, and we fail often to make ourselves understood, but in a play every character says simply and compactly what he has to say, and every other character understands what he has said exactly as he meant it to be understood. These are all departures from fact, and we permit them gladly in the play-house because they are for our pleasure. Without these departures from the fact, authorized by convention, by an unconscious contract between the author and the audience, the drama could not exist. In the theater we are willing to "make believe," as we did while we were playing the games of our childhood, and if we refuse to make believe we find ourselves forced to forego the pleasure which the theater can provide only by the aid of these necessary conventions. The time can never

come when the stage will surrender the conventions necessary to its existence, fundamental and inevitable. Other conventions there are not eternally necessary, suited to the conditions of the theater of a certain time and a certain country, and revealing themselves as incongruous when the conditions are different. On the Elizabethan platform-stage a character might soliloquize at will, talking directly at the spectators and telling them, as Iago does and Richard III. also, how bad a man he is. On the modern picture-frame stage the characters must take care not to get "out of the picture," and therefore the soliloquy has been discovered to be incongruous. Temporary and local conventions disappear as the theater is modified through the ages; but there are certain fundamental conventions which endure and which will never disappear, because without them the art of the playwright is impossible, just as the arts of the painter and of the sculptor are impossible unless they also are permitted to depart from the facts in accord with the essential conventions of their several arts.

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